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**THE OTHER WAY**  
**(A new society in a slow economy)**

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## Abstract

The situation is serious. For the first time in history, capitalism is experiencing a triple crisis, economic, social and environmental. The causes are well-known by now and no comments are necessary. The time is past for analysis: now we need proposals.

This pamphlet is important because it concentrates on solutions. Not short-term solutions which simply postpone the problems, but a more thorough research for definitive answers.

It is clear that opulent countries of the world must reduce consumption. Only in this way will the environmental balance be re-established in respect of future generation and of the poorest populations yet to experience the basic comforts and securities that the rich world take for granted.

On an individual level, many people have decided to adopt lighter lifestyles in terms of footprint, and their conclusion is that change is possible and indeed pleasant. Difficulties arise on a social level: if we consume less what will become of jobs? If we produce less, who will supply the state with the money to provide public services?

Employment and public economy maintenance are the two key factors that keep us tightly connected to growth.

The dilemma seems irresolvable but as this pamphlet claims, there is a way out, if only we can reduce the centrality of the market and free the public economy from dependence on tax. We should re-evaluate self sufficiency, and get away from an economy like a castle built on just one pillar, to an economy more like a village formed of independent and autonomous little houses.

Is this Utopia? Possibly. But resources are diminishing, the climate more and more unstable and population inequalities more and more pronounced.

Big decisions can no longer be postponed

## **Part one: WHERE WE ARE**

### **1.How we ended up in the ditch**

The world economy has gone off the road because for more than twenty years it has been run by drivers in a state of inebriation. That is to say the drunkenness of free trade: ungoverned markets totally free to follow their predatory instinct. In the end the car skidded, went off the road and rolled down the bank. A foreseeable outcome: reckless driving leads to accidents.

The newspapers put the crisis down to risky banking choices, but that's only the end of the story. To understand what happened we should start from globalization.

It's the late eighties. Multinationals are impatient to get beyond their national borders, claiming the right to market their produce all over the world without legal restraint. They scheme and quarrel and finally get what they want. Then they realize the worldwide market doesn't exist: only 30%-35% of populations have enough money to absorb their products, the others are just dead wood. As a result a lot of firms are juggling too few clients and they enter into fierce competition using price reduction. Obviously requiring profits they have to reduce costs as well, so threatening the work process. The favoured strategy in high technology sectors is automation, while elsewhere they choose to transfer production to low-wage countries. A new world emerges, characterized by a South crowded with workers in semi-slavery and a North with increasing numbers of unemployed or underpaid temporary workers. The result is a poorer working class worldwide – but the bosses are rubbing their hands together: from 2000 to 2005 the proportion of world riches gone to profit increased by 8%. This has had two consequences. First, the financial explosion caused by capitalists' loss of faith in their own system's selling capacity. Their reasoning is simple: when the average wage decreases, sales prospects diminish, so it makes no sense to invest in new production. Better to speculate, and accrue wealth gambling property and stock market shares, whether real or fake. The main thing being to stay in the game and bring the money home each time. The future can take care of itself.

The second consequence is the explosion of debts: when pay packets are thin the circuit breaks between production and sales. Stability would be regained with fairer distribution of wealth but for the system this is not an option: decisions are put off with stop-gap solutions and the circle is squared by allowing for debt. On every street corner there appear banks, financial agents and supermarkets ready to lend through hire purchase, mortgage or loan to the poor and less poor. The illusion of living beyond your means is to hand. Families everywhere have swallowed the bait.

In Italy in 2010 the total debt of families came to about 70% of their total income, something like 20,000 euros per family. It was in the United States however where people got into the worst trouble with house-buying. In the euphoria of business affairs mortgages were being offered to poor families, unreliable ones, based on tortuous speculative activities involving banks, insurance, investment and pension funds. All was plain sailing while repayments were low and houses regained value, but when things went into reverse the whole card house collapsed and many families were ruined. One bank failed after another, trust gave way to suspicion which paralysed the whole lending system and banks and businesses floundered from lack of funds. Finance is really more about psychology than science.

With the eruption of the financial crisis the rot underneath has come to the surface: entire economies are bogged down because consumption is not absorbing production. By the end of 2008 the system had to admit a state of crisis, and appealed to governments, the only adequate breakdown service, to intervene. With a single aim: to pull the car up the bank and make it roadworthy. Billions have been allocated, representing shall we say the sharp tugs needed to get the car back on the road. But it is extremely doubtful that they can get it running because meanwhile the road itself has become rocky and soft-edged from overuse - and the only way for the car is to go very slowly using strong shock-absorbers and a more prudent driver. To get out of the metaphor – resources are thinning, social tensions are mounting and the climate meanwhile is going into tilt. To avoid total breakdown, we must move from a growth to a limitative economy, from that of the cowboy to that of the astronaut, but also from the precarious to the safe, the greedy to the equitable. We could call it an economy of respect or “well-living”, a just, sustainable economy that can guarantee us all a decent existence in awareness of the planet. A road to go down as soon as possible because the double crisis, environmental and social, leaves us no time.

## **2. Planet in the red**

August 21st 2010 was called “Overshoot Day”. That day human greed overtook the regenerating capacity of the Earth. By the end of the year, the surplus fruits all gone, we were starting in on the “natural capital”: the generators. According to the WWF we consume 30% more natural produce than the Earth can regenerate and at this rate will need two planets by 2030-40.<sup>2</sup> A research published in “Nature” (May 2003) shows that only 10% of big fish existing in 1950 are left in the oceans. Even cod, once so numerous as to slow down North Atlantic ships, have been decimated.

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<sup>2</sup> Wwf, Living Planet 2010

We can talk about forests. In the early 1900s the forest-covered surface of the world was five billion hectares. At the end of the century it was three billion, a straight 40% loss, with the most damage to tropical forests. Greenpeace warns that it is increasing. "From 1970 to 2000 the Brazilian Amazon has lost 55 million hectares, an area as big as France: And now it's Russia's turn. Japanese multinationals have received the go-ahead and the countdown has begun: every year 15000 hectares of conifers disappear from European Russia alone, thus threatening the last untouched corner of the continent".

Food itself is in a bad state, and prices show it. In March 2008 contract valuations of cereals in Chicago were 130% higher than the year before, and repercussions on bread and rice were inevitable. In opulent countries the blow was assimilated but in many poor ones there were uprisings. Riots took place in Cairo, Addis Ababa, Jakarta, Bogota. In Port-au-Prince, Haiti, seven protesters lost their lives. Understandable riots: when you live under two dollars a day, it takes only a few cents more on bread for the spectre of famine to arise. It is always said that planet Earth can guarantee food for not only six but twelve billion people, but it depends what food we are talking about. Certainly not meat, which makes no sense in terms of energy when you need 4 to 10 vegetable calories to make one animal calory. Until 2005 meat was the prerogative of countries industrialized early, that while representing only 14% of world population had cornered 35% of total cereal production to fatten cattle and pigs for steak and sausage. Now in the South of the world and particularly in China a better-off class has emerged who in deference to a Western consumerist model has increased its demand for meat, and consequently for cereals. Meat therefore is a main cause of pressure on prices: but we can add another just as overwhelming: oil. Though aware that petrol is running out, we are unable to give up our cars, and there is therefore a hunt for new fuels. After a temporary flirtation with hydrogen we have opted for bio-ethanol obtained from sugar-cane, beet and also maize and soya. As a result fuel is now competing with food. The oil crisis is now official. The IEA (International Energy Agency) itself admits that we are approaching a productive peak, the moment when world production of petrol starts to drop because the easy extraction phase has come to an end.<sup>3</sup> The aim of the IEA now is to take time, having us believe that this problem needs only be faced in 2020-2025, but out of 90 producing countries a good 62 including

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<sup>3</sup>The productive life of a well can be represented by a curve. The ascendant phase corresponds to the first period of drilling and production, after which follows a plentiful and cheap period of extraction because the well is so full that oil comes to the surface easily, sometimes on its own. Gradually the pressure becomes less intense and to extract the oil it has to be re-integrated from outside. This manoeuvre works for a while and the well gains its highest productive ability known as "peak oil". After this there is a phase of falling production at increasingly high cost until the well is abandoned as not worth exploiting any more.

Russia are already on the way down.<sup>4</sup>

As well as petrol a variety of other minerals of technological importance are running out. Mercury for example is already 95% extracted, lead, silver and gold more than 80%, arsenic, cadmium and zinc around 70%. Extraction of tin, lithium and selenium are reckoned at about 60% extracted, while manganese, copper, beryl and tungsten are at about 50%.<sup>5</sup>

Neither is uranium doing well. While some people push for nuclear power to resolve the problem of electrical energy, geologists are telling us that at the present rate of consumption there will be no uranium to be had in fifty years.

But the resource which gives most cause for worry is water. "Blue gold" is running low everywhere because we have used it thoughtlessly and because we have contaminated water sources with our poisonous substances. We forget that water is an integral part of all productive processes, industrial as well as agricultural: it goes into them clean and comes out fouled. 16 tons of water are needed to tan a kilogram of leather, 2000 litres for a kilo of white paper, 2700 litres for a 250 gram T-shirt. By means of dams, catch basins and underground pump systems we have in the last fifty years tripled the world water supply, stocking cities, industries and farms in continual expansion. But water-tables are sinking, lakes are drying up and some rivers no longer reach the sea. In so far as the phenomenon concerns Italy, compared to 80 years ago, the average flow of the Tiber has decreased by 25%, that of the Flumendosa in Sardinia by 35%. The Arno has lost as much as 45%. The reduction of river-flow has partly to do with climate change: in the last 20 years rainfall in Italy has lessened by 25%. And so we come to a further substance, this time not a resource but a reject. An invisible waste with a barely perceptible smell, inoffensive, and within limits indispensable but beyond them catastrophic: we are talking about carbon fumes from car exhausts, factory chimneys, power stations and our own central heating. Filtered through trees and oceans the planet can deal with 11 billion tons of it a year. But we are producing 26 billion tons. A surplus which for decades has been accumulating in the stratosphere to cause overheating of the earth's surface.<sup>6</sup> Between 1906 and 2005 global mean temperature has increased by 0.7 degrees centigrade, a seemingly insignificant amount, but enough to alter the complex phenomena that regulate the climate. It is our misfortune that carbon dioxide is not just impalpable but well-mannered, since it transfers itself without help into the celestial dump. Solid waste however, is not so polite: if it is not removed it piles up in the city streets. In Italy alone every year we produce

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<sup>4</sup> Financial Times, *Running on Empty?* 20 May 2008

<sup>5</sup> *Altreconomia*, December 2008.

<sup>6</sup> UNDP, *Fighting Climate Change*, 2007. The data on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions refer to an average for 2000-2005.

550 kilos a head, and no longer know where to put it. They build us incinerators with assurances of safety. But these cause widespread concern not only for their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions but also for the PM 10 or nanoparticles which penetrate blood circulation through pulmonary alveoli causing dysfunctions and cancers all over the body.

### **3. Humanity shattered**

Resource exhaustion and waste accumulation are clear signals of a system which is devouring itself. But at the same time half the world population has yet to experience the taste of human dignity. Thus social and environmental crises are locked in mortal embrace. According to World Bank statistics these people are three billion.<sup>7</sup> They are pictured as the crying child sitting naked outside its hut, the man with the hollow sunburnt face and a machete trying to clear himself a bit of land from the forest; the lean woman in rags looking for food in a mountain of refuse. These are the absolute poor who in the arid language of money live on less than 2,5 dollars a day. In the practical language of life, they can't satisfy their basic needs. They eat only once a day with a diet almost entirely of starch and legumes. Most drink well or river-water, and have no sanitation. They live in shacks made up from salvaged bits and pieces, or huts of natural materials. They have few scraps of clothing and not much education. They have no way to cure sickness and for emergency needs beyond mere survival must go into debt.

The absolute poor live in scattered country villages or the crowded shanty towns of the cities. They survive on precarious low-paid jobs at the mercy of bosses, foremen or traders. But we come across them daily through what we use, when we drink a cup of coffee, eat a banana, wear a pair of trainers. In these basic items we see the face of the African farmer who has to sell his coffee for 20 cents a kilo while we buy it at 5 dollars, of the Ecuadorian lad who works 10 hours in the banana plantation for a dollar and a half, of the little Chinese girl who for 30 cents an hour produces the designer sneakers that we buy for over \$ 200. So the first person we meet every morning before greeting our partner or children is a Kenyan peasant or a Brazilian labourer, maybe one of the absolute poor.

Anyone with some social awareness feels indignant at a world where the richest 20% enjoy 86% of the wealth while the poorest 40% have to be content with 3%. We should fight against globalization which in the name of free markets gives multinationals like Nestle, Kraft and Sara Lee the power to fix prices of coffee and cocoa at starvation level. We should put

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Haughton & Shahidur Khandker, *Handbook on Poverty + Inequality*, World Bank 2009

pressure on Nike, Adidas and all firms that delocalize so that they pay a decent wage. But the battle for fairer rules and correct behaviour is no longer enough. We are not in the twentieth century any more when justice was perceived as bringing the inhabitants of the planet equally to a high standard of living. Today, the planet has not the means to guarantee all the families in the world a car, a washing machine, a fridge, packed wardrobes and a meat diet. If all the world were to live like the Americans, it has been calculated, there would need to be five planets – one for fields, one for oceans, one for mines, one for forests and one to dump the rubbish. We don't have four spare planets, and with this single planet we have to fulfil two fundamental aims: to leave our children a habitable world, and to bring the impoverished rapidly out of their misery. We in the North are overweight and need to lose it, but they haven't even reached a healthy weight. They need to eat more, dress, study and travel more and get good treatment. And they can only do it if we the fatties agree to go on a diet because there is competition for scarce resources and endangered environmental space. The moral of the tale is that we can no longer speak of justice without reckoning with sustainability. The only way to have equity and sustainability is for the rich to convert to sobriety, to a meaner, cleaner, slower individual and collective life-style which fits better into natural cycles.

“Live simply, so others can simply live” said Gandhi, a long time ago in the 1940s.

#### **4. Simple living or no living**

We have arrived at the point where de-growth, reduction, moderation, austerity, sobriety or whatever we want to call it, is no longer an option; it is the way we are compelled to go to save the planet and humanity. But in the kingdom of growth, “reduction” is a blasphemy, a heresy that scandalizes and turns people away. It conjures up murky pictures of a time when you could die from tetanus, you exhausted yourself doing the laundry: when you only had a candle to light you and cold could kill. But sobriety is not penury, just as consumerism is not well-being. Perhaps it's with actual language that we have to start, clarifying ideas before rearranging the words, at least to get rid of common misconceptions. Some words have positive values and others negative, through association rather than logic. A word can give pleasant sensations from automatic association with situations we recognize as enjoyable, an other can cause anxiety from a link with unwelcome thoughts. “Consumerism” is generally taken as a positive concept, associated with the idea of a more comfortable, satisfying, even happy, life. But is this really so? In the seventies surveys were done to verify whether money made people happy. A myth collapsed as all the research showed that more income made us happy only up to \$ 10-15,000 a year, after which the lines diverge: that of riches goes up, that

of happiness stays level.<sup>8</sup> In Britain, the number of people who call themselves “content” has gone from 52% in 1957 to 36% at present.<sup>9</sup> Various scholars have looked for an explanation of this (called by some the paradox of happiness) and a few concentrated on desires, that is needs fostered more by outside stimuli and conditioning than by personal necessity: choices dictated by fashion, envy, the urge to have the best. Tibor Scitovsky, an American economist, explains that pleasure related to these forms of consumption are fleeting, last until the novelty wears off.<sup>10</sup> In the end what prevails is not happiness but boredom. It’s absurd: the more we buy, the more we surround ourselves with things that on the whole bore us. Thus you could say growth works towards unhappiness.

The phenomenon of adjustment is a mechanism familiar to pharmacology and known to drug users as habituation or tolerance. In time the same amount of drug does not produce the desired effect any more, so in order to feel it the dose must be increased. Consumers behave in the same way: to feel renewed pleasure one must buy new products, often more expensive. A triumph for the market since it needs perennially unsatisfied consumers in order to sell, but death for the consumer, who, like the hunter chasing a leaping hare falls into the trap himself. To tempt us advertisement insists on pleasures: sensuality, beauty, elegance, riches, ignoring the small detail that to have things we need money. This detail does not escape us however, and in order to rise to the challenge of super-consumption, we accept the sacrifice of most of our time through work. Time: an aspect we never consider. In 2007 Scales of Justice, an Italian campaign group promoting responsible consumption, calculated in euros the work-time needed to buy certain products. Taking as an example a net wage of 10 euros an hour, we must work 18 hours (more than 2 days) for a cellphone worth 180 euros, 40 hours for a plasma TV set worth 400 euros and some 1500 hours (six months) to buy a medium-powered motor car. With a car of course the purchase is only the first step. To travel in it we need insurance, road tax, fuel. According to a 2006 study by the Italian Caracciolo Foundation, on average a car absorbs 4,445 euros a year (440 working hours). If we add time spent in traffic, maintenance, and finding parking space, we could say that in a year a car uses about 1000 hours of our life. Making similar calculations for our other goods, we realize that we are actually living in order to consume. Let us bear in mind that the average house contains about 10,000 objects (compared to say the 236 found in a Navajo settlement). For each of these possessions we

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<sup>8</sup>The first economist who studied the happiness/income equation was Richard Easterlin in 1974. In fact the happiness paradox is also called the Easterlin paradox. This phenomenon has been studied further by Robert Frank and Daniel Kahneman

<sup>9</sup> World Watch Institute, *State of the world 2008*

<sup>10</sup>Tibor Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy*, 1976

must work, get to the shop, choose it, queue to pay. At home we assemble or position it, clean and dust it. Considering all this, super-consumption reveals itself as forced labour, sucking our life away.

We have lived under the misapprehension that happiness depends on the money-god, and we have sacrificed all our time at its altar. We rush about and worry and curse that there's no time left. Eight hours of work are not enough, we have to do overtime. Hours spent away from home increase, there's no more time for ourselves, for our relationship, for the children, for a social life. We have to hurry! Insomnia creeps in, neurosis, crisis with our partner, and problems are held at bay with pills. 39% of Europeans say they feel stressed.<sup>11</sup> Rates of youth crime mount when adolescents are neglected: so does the rate of solitude among children who throw themselves into the arms of television. A survey conducted in Italy in 2007 showed that children spend on average an hour and 36 minutes every day in front of the TV, an hour and 5 minutes at the computer and 55 minutes playing video games.

Here then is the second source of unhappiness in a society of growth: human relations that are insufficient, fleeting, transitory. A liquid society, as Zygmunt Bauman defines it. A society with fragile, unstable, hurried connections continually forming and decomposing like water molecules. Relationships consumed like ice-cream, a lick and away. Cellular phone communication comes bubbling up, SMS flood the ether under the illusion that quantity can compensate quality. But in a human context this throwaway logic doesn't work and unease comes to the surface. Each time in a different form with its inevitable accompanying jargon: depression, anorexia, bulimia, alcoholism, drug addiction, aggression. Even bullying is a result of affliction and we should not blame youthful sadism for it but ourselves, for not being there, for our distraction and uncaringness. In the papers in June 2008 we read about a little girl of 12 who took photos of herself naked in sexy poses and flogged them to her friends for the money to buy designer clothes. The psychologist Paolo Crepet was categorical: "This is simply the umpteenth case of loneliness and crisis in adolescents. We cannot blame 12 year olds if they value fashion more than their own dignity: it is the adult world that's stuck in a short circuit".

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<sup>11</sup> Eurostat, *Key Figures on health pocket Book EU15*, 2001

## Part two: WHERE TO GO

### 5 Aiming to live well

It is untrue that more equals better or that growth can always be associated with development. When the body is invaded by a monstrous cancer infiltrating liver and kidneys, squeezing the brain and deforming the face, that is growth, but of illness. A misdevelopment leading to death. And as cancer reorganizes entire areas to serve its expansion, thus consumerism redefines our nature to suit us to its purposes. Make us into vacuum bins, fast-track digestive channels.

But we have tolerated the insult too far; we now need to rebel, to yell in the face of the dealers that we are not a mass of flesh awaiting electrical stimulus like frogs. We have to reaffirm our dignity as people of many dimensions. We have emotional, intellectual, spiritual and social spheres in our bodies. A balanced well-being satisfies all these in harmony, not with one dominating another but each fulfilled to a right measure. To each dimension its time, space and specific quality.

Martin Luther King said that the first people to resist the abolition of slavery were not whites but blacks because they had grown accustomed to it. In the same way the first people to resist a new concept of well-being could be we ourselves who have every reason to change: unfortunately consumerism and money have made slaves of us. We were born, grew up and grow old within the consumer logic and it is not easy to get out of. One way to do so is to make a clean sweep and start afresh using language as a tool.

Well-being is a good word, implicitly including all the dimensions of a person. It also means “living well” which under mercantile influence has come to mean well off or comfortably off: so these days well-being has turned into well-having. Thus a lovely word becomes twisted by economic interest and after centuries of improper use there is no hope for it to recover its original meaning. Better to use another word. The indigenous people of Latin America have the word *benivivir* -well living-, which is all the better for referring to life and not to the individual. Bolivia has even inserted it among the principles of its new constitution.<sup>12</sup>

There are words which represent a whole world. They contain the philosophy, cosmic vision and values of a whole people. In the Aymara language of the Andes, well-living is *suma-qamana*. *Suma* means lovely, sweet, good or even “the best you can imagine” while *qamana* means live or dwell but also welcome, because for them to live is to share and welcome. So living not just in the physical sense of beating heart, breathing lungs but living in a human

<sup>12</sup> Article 8 of the Bolivian Constitution approved 15.12.2007

social sense aware of your surroundings and relating to all creatures. Evo Morales, the Bolivian president, explained that “*suma-qamana* is not just living well but living together and looking out for each other”. A vision of community instead of individualism, of the gift as against market exchange. A vision of social value as opposed to monetary value. Two planets light years away from each other, private and public, that for the good of humanity have to meet.

From the single person's standpoint *well-living* could be a situation with guaranteed social conditions concerning people's rights, a good quality of life and a healthy environment. Food, water, a place to live, health, education but also social inclusion, political liberty, religious liberty, are some of the inalienable rights of well-living covering the whole economic, social and political spectrum. *Quality of life* could represent the distances we travel, working and leisure hours, architecture and urban planning, forms of housing, parks and services, opportunities to congregate socially and politically, all dependent on organization. Finally the quality of air and water, the state of health of seas and rivers, the stability of the climate are aspects that guarantee a healthy environment.

And now we come to a key question, the one that we find the most preoccupying: can we reduce human consumption of petrol, minerals, water and air without compromising this *benivir* or well-living? The answer is, we not only can but must. These are areas in which quality of life does not depend on availability of resources, but on models of organization. To live well in a city requires green areas, historic centres closed to traffic, cycle paths, adequate public transport, scattered small shops, places to meet. To live well at home, people need small blocks of flats or houses with common space and facilities that favour meeting. To work well, people need activities spread over the territory to avoid commuting and encourage participation. To relate well people need reduced work time, time without television, economic stability that will favour dialogue and a relaxed family atmosphere. None of this requires barrels of oil, only political choices.

There are other areas, those connected to the quality of the environment, in which the oil barrels must be reduced. To bring down levels of CO<sub>2</sub> there has to be a reduction in electrical energy produced by fossil-combusted power-stations. There has to be a reduction of cars in circulation. We have to reduce the distances incorporated into merchandise. We have to adopt sobriety, meaning an attempt to satisfy our needs bringing down to a minimum the resources we use and the waste we produce.

## **6. Efficiency is good but not enough**

The alarm bell about climate and resources has been sounded for a while but our economic system has always been opposed to the idea of reduction. It prefers to invest in technology, the setting-up of machines which increasingly refine productive methods to reach lower levels of resources and energy consumption. Eco-efficiency is certainly a way to go but not enough on its own.

Many economists have noted that to manufacture 'light' makes no difference at all if you are going to turn out 'more'.

The English economist William Stanley Jevons understood this in the late nineteenth century. His point of observation was the steam boiler: as the technology improved every year it became more efficient and coal-consumption went down, but only in the individual machine. The country's coal consumption went up because there were more boilers.

The phenomenon has been called 'the rebound effect' or Jevons' paradox and it is there for all to see. Although we have now entered the age of the computer, an immaterial or virtual economy, the consumption of energy and materials in rich countries continues to increase. In Italy between 1995 and 2005 energy consumption rose by 14% and carbon dioxide emissions by 12%. On European levels net consumption of materials (mineral, combustible and biomass) went from 15.9 tons per head in 1980 to 17.5 in 2000, an increase of 10%. Yet in the same period the incidence of these materials per euro of wealth produced were down by 39%.<sup>13</sup> Whether we like it or not, without sobriety there is nowhere for us to go.

## **7. The roads to sobriety**

In everyday life sobriety is about small choices. As in: less cars, more bicycles, less private, more public transport; less meat, more beans; less globalized, more local products; less bought snacks, more hand-made sandwiches; less frozen food, more food in season; less bottled water, more tap water; less pre-cooked food, more time in the kitchen, less packaged, more weighed food; less containers to throw away, more refills. Sobriety of this kind can be recommended under ten headings:

- Avoid disposable items. They produce the most waste.
- Avoid the unnecessary. Before buying anything ask yourself if you really need it or if you are just responding to ad-conditioning. Examples are bottled water, the latest fashion, cell - phones.
- Give precedence to second-hand items. If you decide to buy something don't rush in and buy

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<sup>13</sup> Wuppertal Institute, *Resource Use in European Countries*, 2003

it new. Ask around first: someone might have what you need.

- Avoid the superfluous. Watch out for over-packaging. Favour re-usable or recyclable containers.
- Make your own. If you produce your own yogurt, cake, jams etc. you avoid both miles and packaging.
- Choose near and natural. Buying local and organic you avoid food miles, support local labour and contribute to a healthy environment.
- Make collective choices. The best and cheapest way for many to satisfy their needs while minimizing consumption of resources and energy. As well as travelling by bus or train, many household goods can be shared: car, bicycle, vacuum cleaner, drill, washing machine.
- Repair and recycle. Lengthening the life of objects saves resources and reduces waste.
- Lower your energy bills. By bicycling, insulating the house, investing in renewable energy, using more efficient machines intelligently, you can reduce energy consumption with benefit to resources and your purse.
- Recuperate waste. Recycling your waste gives it new life in another form.

### **8. Alarm about work and services**

Personal and group experiences show that sobriety is possible and also liberating, but there are worrying social implications. As one might expect, unions and political parties on the left are more hostile than business to the idea of de-growth. Their alarm is about fairness, jobs and public services. This is in part anachronism, in part a real difficulty. Certain tired slogans are still used in Marxist circles like: “poverty can’t be distributed” or “production first, wealth distribution second” which sounded well enough in early industrial times but not in an opulent society overladen with wealth to distribute. More justified is the anxiety over jobs and services: if we consume less what will happen to jobs? It is a fact that if we adopted (say) a serious programme of recycling, thousands of jobs would be created: people for door-to-door collection of rubbish, people to divide up material into repairable and not, people sorting scrap into plastic, metal, wood and more, people recuperating primary materials. The International Recycling Office in Brussels calculates that at world level this field already occupies a million and a half people, the total value of which amounts to 160 billion dollars.<sup>14</sup> UNEP, the UN environmental agency, holds that this figure is under-estimated, calculating that in the US, Brazil and China alone recycling in all its forms employs 12 million people.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> World Watch Institute, *State of the world*, 2004

<sup>15</sup> UNEP, *Green Jobs: towards decent work in a sustainable low carbon world*, 2008

It is also true that a greater attention to the environment creates occupation through the expansion of sectors such as water-purification, consultancies to firms about conservation of energy, organic farming, conservation of woods and territory. One has to admit, however, that between jobs created and lost, the balance would be negative. If we stopped driving, if we stopped filling our wardrobes with endless clothes, and our trolleys with absurd amounts of plastic packaging, repaired our household appliances instead of getting rid of them, if we actually banned advertisement, we would lose hundreds of thousands of jobs, perhaps millions. As we would also lose them if we closed down arms factories, pesticide factories that poison farmlands and water-beds, chemical factories that disseminate cancer. A necessary change, but we find it alarming. Because if we produce less and so earn less, who will provide the state with the money to guarantee us education, health, good roads, public transport? Even if the popularity of taxes is at an all-time low: the poor pay them unwillingly, the rich even more so. Still we all want a good health service, a good school, clean and punctual trains, fast moving law proceedings and an efficient bureaucracy. Low taxes and high service, that is what we want, the classic “have our cake and eat it”.

Politicians know this, and the rabbit all governments pull out of the hat is called growth. It's a question of numbers. If we have a share of 10% in a total of 1000 we get 100, but if the capital is 10,000 we can have 1000. The same interest generates a higher yield in proportion to the size of the pie it is cut from. Hence the conclusion of all governments, right or left: “You want a lot of services and low taxes? Then the economy must grow!”

While there were growth-margins this reasoning could stand up. But what to do now that we have to reduce, not grow?

## **9. The economy of three houses**

To marry sustainability with jobs and rights for all, there have to be three radical transformations: political, cultural and organizational.

The political angle requires a redefinition of our chosen path in the new economy. Public or private? Local or global? Big or small? Slow or fast? Centralised or spread about? We believe that a society dedicated to well-living demands more cooperation and less competition. It needs to be more local and less global, more self-sufficient with less money, more collective and less private. Experience will help us decide whether this intuition is correct.

From a cultural point of view we have to be prepared to rethink our way of perceiving the great themes of our economy: well-being, science, technology, nature. For example we have to be convinced that ‘work’ is a false problem. We are not aspiring to toil, but to assure

ourselves food, lodging, health, instruction and other necessities of life. In the competitive system the only way to satisfy these needs is through purchase. As this practice requires money, we experience work as a matter of life and death. But if we found a way to guarantee these essentials without actually paying money for them, we could shrug off salaries, and growth.

Dependence on money is a problem in the public sphere as well. Today the public economy is doubly tied to growth because it needs money to function, and to get that needs a lot of tax, and to get that it needs a growing economy. Again the problem is money itself, and again the solution is to do without.

Free the public economy from money and we free it from the chains of growth. For that we need to face the third great transformation, that of organization.

Strategic, cultural and organizational transformation, only possible if we start from scratch from a few basic questions: who and what is the economy organized for ? For corporations or for people ? For having or for being ? For privilege for a few or rights for all ? In respect of the planet, or are we just its pillagers ? If the answer is that the economy should be organized for people, then we have to rewrite the economic order of our - people's - needs. Needs can be divided into two categories (this will be gone into in more detail from chapter 11); fundamental needs, and desires. The first are rights to be guaranteed to all for the sake of human dignity. The second are options at the discretion of the individual because they regard personal inclination or requirement. Consequently rights are in the camp of collective solidarity whereas desires are in that of the market. We conclude that the economy should be organized with the distinction of the ends from the means. Not the same means for all but for each end the means most appropriate. The carpenter has a saw, a screwdriver and a hammer in his box. The saw to cut up a plank, the hummer to drive a nail, the screwdriver to dismantle a cupboard. If he used the hammer for everything he would not be a carpenter but a destructive lunatic.

The capitalist economy does not follow this logic because the market has been elevated to the status of dogma. It is the main instrument, the touchstone for all situations, the pivot around which the entire economy turns. It is the tyrant we all depend on: our work, our salary, the successful running of public finance. It is as though we had built a castle on a single pillar. An absurd and dangerous dependency not only because each time we need to build a new room we have to waste cement reinforcing the pillar, but above all because if the pillar collapses the whole castle comes down. In a period of recession we can see with our own eyes that the crisis is not confined to the market but stretches out through the entire system: consumption

diminishes, employment crumbles, public services totter.

This dangerous dependency is hardly a law of nature. It derives from the arrogance of traders and corporations who have forced the entire economy to act in their interests. After eight centuries of colonization we have stuffed ourselves with a culture of mercantilism, reasoning only in terms of money, calculating national wealth only in terms of marketable goods; we can't imagine any other economic space than that of the market, of buying and selling. Our thinking has become a one-way street: we can't conceive of other public behaviours than greed, personal advantage, the hunt for profit. Ideas of giving, gratuity, community, solidarity are forgotten, even derided as childish. Politics itself has changed. Once its task was to manage public affairs in its citizens' interest. Today its task is to support the market, give it space to grow, allow it to function without constraint with a false respect for its code of honour in terms of competitiveness. The market is always absolved, justified, sustained even when it puts the stability of the system at risk in the name of avidity. We have had proof of this with the financial crisis of 2008: governments all over the world shelled out hundreds of million of dollars to keep banks going, banks themselves at risk of bankruptcy for having gambled clients' money like poker-players. And not a single bank manager brought to trial! The only way to liberate our private life and the public economy from growth is by autonomy. The economy cannot go on resembling the castle built on a pillar; it should become more like a village with a variety of houses, each independent of the other, each with its own generator, a well, an outhouse.

If a building collapses or the lights go out the others remain sound and safe. And so we introduce the economy of the three houses: The do it yourself house, the collective house and the market exchange house. Each with its own role, autonomy and working mechanism.

### **10. The do it yourself house**

In the market kingdom, do it yourself is frowned upon as it frees people from dependence on business. Every time we produce something ourselves we weaken the market: without a money transaction we are disengaged from the work-salary process. Work done at home is so disparaged that it isn't even reckoned in the gross domestic product which records wealth produced by the nation. GDP includes every button and pin but ignores all jobs done within our own four walls, keeping the house clean, cooking, washing, raising children and caring for the old. Work of fundamental importance without which we would go around dirty and ill with dysentery, our houses invaded by rats and an army of street kids. A French study conducted some time ago said that these activities absorb three-fifths of all work done but are not part of

GDP because it is work freely given and not paid.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand labour counted is that that of technicians making pesticides and land-mines, the tobacconist selling cancer and even the croupier in the casino because they are all paid. Useful or useless, beneficial or damaging, GDP doesn't care as long as the jobs are market-oriented.

In the 20th century the symbol of revolution was the hammer and sickle. Nowadays it could become the screwdriver and paint-brush, symbols of autonomous repair and maintenance. An emblem for DIY to show that the economy should not serve the market but the person. Somebody working, producing, consuming not to enrich the merchants but to permit everyone to satisfy his or her needs in the best way for themselves, for others and for the environment.

In the present system autonomy and independence are thus forgotten words, but the first rule of an economy made for people is to enable them to look after themselves and not depend on consumption, nor on blackmail. In 1789, they had a revolution against the absolutism of the king. Today it should be against the absolutism of the market. Against the ideology that would reduce to slaves all those who sell themselves in the labour market for a few pence which then open the door to the other market where they spend the money and start all over again. Industrialists know that the transition from independence to a salaried job was never a willing one. Ever since the start of the Industrial Revolution they have set up a strategy of dispossession forcing workers into submission. They began with expropriation of land and continued with that of knowledge and self-esteem. A puppet convinced that he can't even blow his own nose and that the only gratification is that of buying everything he fancies, will look for work in a spirit of total submission. He or she will accept any job, won't join a union nor stand up for any rights. And the boss is perceived not as exploiter but as benefactor.

Bread, jams, pullovers, vegetable gardens, repairs: there is so much we can make on our own. Between searching for jobs to pay £ 3000 to a house-painter, and painting it ourselves, doesn't the second choice seem better? A fine short-cut to self-esteem and freedom. The more things we do for ourselves, the less money we need, the less we need a paid job, the less society needs to increase consumption and the more we can be independent of the market and traders' investment decisions. We are finally freer, more in control of our own lives but also more satisfied because our work gives us sensations we don't feel working for someone else. The taste for planning and organizing a job to please ourselves; the pleasure of completing a project; the satisfaction of enjoying at first hand the fruits of our labour.

Older people will recall that straight after the second world war many families were rebuilding their own houses. This sort of thing has become rare because we have lost our manual skills.

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<sup>16</sup> Adret, *Travailler deux heures par jour*, 1977

But this could be remedied by reforming school curriculums which should stop despising manual labour, stop considering humans as all head and no hands – monsters in fact. Calloused rough hands in a fifteen-year-old shock us because they indicate the schooling he hasn't had, the exploitation he *has* had. But the weak pale transparent hands of some twenty-year-olds appal too with their lifelessness. And it certainly seems like the death of know-how when many young people can't even hold a hammer. A real disability because if you don't know how to use your hands you might as well not have any.

It is for schools to fill this gap because their role is not just to give out notions so much as to educate children to be free, sovereign and in control of themselves in all ways, including that of knowing how to carry out the most common functions of life and that is why they need manual skills.

For the same reason schools should take on board questions of health. Many of us know nothing about our own body, how it's made and functions. We live with it but have never really discovered it. We are aware of its presence only when something is wrong. Then we consult the doctor in a state of total submission, not even understanding what s/he is saying about it.

Health is our number one asset, but rather than on doctor's prescriptions it depends on a good diet, personal hygiene and the capacity to read the signals our organism sends us in good time - in short, know how to look after ourselves. This is a particular dimension of do-it-yourself, more knowing than doing. That knowledge school should give us and that can only be from a personal and not a commercial standpoint. The essence of DIY is a strong desire for what is necessary, free and sustainable, three aims that can be arrived at if the work becomes an exchange. The old-style market, not between people with power and those without, but between equals. Not between salesman and client but between producers. A neighbourhood exchange between people living in the same block or road: you repair my bike and I bake you a cake; you mend my washing machine and I give you some vegetables. This is not just trading of objects but also of services as in the timebanking system now operating almost all over Europe.

## **11. The Community House**

DIY is an optimal solution in all those areas, and there are many, where experience and manual skills are common and the amount of technology required is minimal. But as soon as we need a more sophisticated object or service we have to resort to organized production. The productive structures we may need are various but the organization must be one of two types,

public service or private enterprise. What can we expect from one or the other? The answer lies in what we need. From a social perspective some needs are more important than others because they are vital necessities of a physical, psychological or social nature. Air to breathe, water to drink or wash with, food to eat, clothes to wear, a roof to shelter us, fire to cook with and warm us: but we also need teaching to learn, medicine to get well, buses to travel in, telephones to communicate, things we can't do without as a matter of personal dignity. These are therefore fundamental needs, automatically raised to the level of rights, needs, that is, that everyone should have the possibility of satisfying, rich or poor, man or woman, young or old, black or white. Because we are all entitled to them, rights cannot belong to the market with its thousands, millions of businesses of every size in every sphere. In the realm of what it can offer the market is unbeatable. Everything can be had, basic and luxury goods, common and rare objects, legal and illegal products, for war, for peace. But there are always rules, and the market has its own. The rule is, we can have everything but we have got to pay. So we find that the market is not for everyone, just those who have money. If we can spend we get the big welcome, we are courted, respected. If we can't it's the glassy stare, scorn and exclusion.

Rights don't belong to the market sphere but to collectivity. More precisely they belong to the organized community where we have a mutual pact to guarantee rights to all through the contribution of each of us: those who have more paying for those with less to counterbalance the business world where fortunes are often made through the sweat and suffering of others. However these fiscal mechanisms have one defect: the resources available to the community depend on the health of the general economy. If the economy falters it accumulates less, and its presence is less just when we need it most. We do not need collective solidarity when we are in health and good employment. We need it when we are ill and jobless. This is why we are afraid of the recession and pray with clasped hands for economic growth. While there was room to grow that was fair enough. But now the economy is like the elephant in the room, so what can we possibly do? The solution is autonomy, which can be arrived at by an uncoupling from money, or at least a form of redimensioning: a public economy that functions not by taxing income but taxing time. Each of us would be called to spend part of our own time in public service, because work is the most abundant resource we have and the original wellspring of all wealth. This would not mean total abolition of the fiscal system, but a radical alteration of its aims; no more the source of public economy finance but an instrument to direct what will be the third 'house,' that of the market: to guide consumers and businesses towards choices which show greater respect for environmental and social issues.

Free goods and services for free work. It could seem Utopian but in fact it is not even a very

original idea and in some areas is already current practice. An example is the rubbish collection system. This service starts not with the dustmen but in our own houses. When we decide to divide up our waste with bottles under 'glass,' printed matter under 'paper,' containers under 'plastic,' we are ourselves bringing about the first phase of rubbish collection, where the correct functioning of the process depends on us. Let us take health-care. When we keep an old person in bed at home and look after him or her according to the instructions of nursing staff we are collaborating with the health service. When the social services ask us to foster a child it is clearly stated that problems can be resolved or even prevented by sharing responsibility equally with the service concerned. At least 15% of the Italian population is engaged in voluntary work: feeding invalids, putting fires out, cleaning the beaches, doing ambulance work, serving in soup kitchens. And what is voluntary work if not a free service at the disposal of the community? Nine million Italians are telling us that they are not content with a money-based relation with society. They want direct contact, involvement, participation, because that makes them feel more satisfied, more fulfilled. Can we not therefore begin to make this voluntary work into an institution by introducing a community service for twenty-year-olds? At a stroke we could permanently settle an incredible amount of job-seekers and solve a quantity of social and environmental problems. Not to mention the educational effect that a period of community service would have on young people, recreating the sense of belonging and involvement in the community which is the essence of decent living.

More than a pleasure, direct participation is becoming a necessity. For various reasons the money at the disposal of councils is becoming thin on the ground: they have to invent something or services will close down. The only possible solution is the direct involvement of citizens, the most appropriate course of action being up to the area concerned. In July 2004 after the umpteenth cut, Vervio council in Valtellina<sup>17</sup> decided to carry out its own Public Works. The mayor and councillors turned into roadmenders and with the municipal lorry and a generator went from road to road painting pedestrian crossings, stop signs and all the other road signs which make circulation safer. The mayor Giuseppe Saligari, interviewed by *Repubblica*<sup>18</sup> explained their decision: "Even though we have just 243 inhabitants we still need another 50,000 euros for essentials. But instead of giving us this money the government is taking it away. So we decided to do something for ourselves". An example to be followed in all councils: people can take care of their own roads, parks, traffic and safety. Some tasks don't

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<sup>17</sup> Vervio is a municipality in the province of Sondrio (Lombardy)

<sup>18</sup> *La Repubblica* is an Italian daily newspaper

need a degree, just a sense of responsibility. According to the mass media, microcriminality is now the main social problem and in many Italian cities night patrols of civilians have been formed to protect their area. It is sad that we only discover a sense of community when we are defending our possessions, and worse, beating up people we don't like. The only positive element might be that we are not averse to uniting in the common interest. The problem of course is the aim of it, to repress rather than include. Patrols who go around knocking gays and immigrants on the head with ideas of ethnic cleansing must be stopped forthwith and social groups formed instead, members of the community who watch over localities, help those in trouble and alert community services. Cases of social marginalization cannot all be tackled by specialized services and structures: we need a community with people who keep their eyes open, are aware of local networks, and able to make contacts, intervene and give support. A typical example is with the mentally ill. Franco Basaglia<sup>19</sup> has shown Italians the alternative to mental hospital: an efficient domestic service associated with a welcoming and supportive attitude from family and neighbours. Old people could use a similar support. Many of them don't need specialized assistance but just domestic help that anyone can give. If the families in each block of flats could work it out, they could take charge of two or three old couples who are not self-sufficient. It would be enough to take turns to make a meal, clean the floor, shop and help them bath. Meanwhile some more sprightly seniors could make themselves available to run little crèches locally or within the block or estate. This already happens in Denmark. Now in Italy too, due to the shortage of public services, couples are taking in turns to look after everyone's children. This does show that to solve the many problems related to care it could be enough to re-activate the good neighbour policies there used to be in a country village. Re-activated and accredited as a proper social service. The same recognition that should be given to household work and child care. Children are the foundation of tomorrow, and it is in everyone's interest that they grow up healthy, sane and with loving care.

All this would be possible within a new social organization with a different concept of capital. *Capital* was always an adjective meaning *important, fundamental*, so like all adjectives it should be accompanied by a noun. In fact when we say capital, we mean *capital wealth, principal wealth*. In today's system, valued wealth, that which counts the most, is financial. So money and capital have become synonymous. But this is the corporate vision. From our standpoint where the economy would serve the people, the capital, or valued wealth would be

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<sup>19</sup> Franco Basaglia was a psychiatrist who died in 1980. He fought for the abolition of mental asylums in Italy and the re-integration of the mentally ill in society

social cohesion. It's the classic "strength in union". The community itself, the sharing of work and knowledge for mutual support. This is such an obvious truth it hardly needs telling. Yet for many it might be news, as the idea of community is not within their cultural horizon. Beyond family and circle of friends many of us are unused to other social groupings. We live in housing blocks populated by hundreds of people but as we step out of our own front door we feel we are in foreign territory. We don't know the people in the next door flat and we only know the ones above because we have asked them to keep the noise down. Pretty well everything has contributed to keep us apart: the culture of individualism, the cities too big, lack of common space in the building, too much money in our pockets which made us think we could manage everything on our own. Paradoxically the welfare state, pride of social democracy, has also worked in the same direction by giving us institutions to take the place of community. Yet if we could succeed in reconstituting neighbourhood networks we would regain in money, resources and "living well". Every time a car moves with only the driver in it, it's one in the eye for energy saving. But there can be car sharing which is buying one in common, and car pooling which is not leaving your house till you've asked your neighbour if he/she is going in the same direction. Where families have made friends with each other they can lend things, do favours, help each other out, even share possessions. As well as the car, we can share the vacuum cleaner, the washing machine, the drill, the videocamera, things that are used now and again. Families that choose to live in co-housing have common space for shared services: a laundry, games room, library, maybe a small workshop: this is quite a quality jump from housing conceived as a row of rabbit hutches.

At present this idea that the public machine could function through the direct action of citizens is only a suggestion and the technical detail cannot be gone into *a priori*: that would depend on the technology used, the services to be covered, the flexibility needed. The contribution could be two days a week, a week in a month, a month or two a year spent in a public factory or service.

Each according to his/her preference in the task most congenial to her/him.

S/he could be a driver, a nurse, a clerk, a police officer, in the fire-brigade, a mechanic, programmer or builder. Jobs nobody likes could be done in rotation. The functions are anyway many and various and everyone would find their niche.

For a while perhaps in one place, then in another, with periods of requalification to adapt to the new one. Forms of organization would be varied and experience would help in finding the most suitable job to guarantee a good service and equally a good quality of life for the worker.

Certainly a part-time job would be guaranteed to all. Each person would build up their responsibilities by degrees, starting gradually in adolescence, taking on the maximum in adulthood and winding down in their old age. In practice every adult would put a few days a month at the service of the community, and in exchange the community would guarantee to each the right to all public services free from the cradle to the grave. No more prescription charges, no more school fees, no more tickets for local transport. Free services but also free facilities. Water, electricity and gas would be supplied to the home. Basic necessities would cost nothing at first, then be priced to avoid over-use.

Food, clothes and other main items could be obtained in various ways. One hypothesis could be a personal electromagnetic card rechargeable monthly to use for free collection of a predetermined amount of goods from the local public store. A kind of subsistence income guaranteed to all. Not obligatory, but an opportunity people can take or leave. The important thing is to create the conditions for everyone to have enough to live on.

In summary we can say that there are ten sectors the public structure should take care of, divided into two categories: vital needs and social rights. In the first belong water, food, clothes, lodging, energy, public sanitation and environmental protection. In the second, health, education, communications, transport, research. The big innovation being that these rights and needs are guaranteed through people's work. And not only that.

In order to guarantee full autonomy to the public dimension we have to ensure it has a production of its own once more. After years of privatization, public administration does not own a single factory and is forced to buy everything it needs from the market: from paper to brooms, computers to railway engines. And yet in certain sectors the state is the main or only client. An example is the pharmaceutical industry: in Italy the national health system absorbs 70% of total medical expenditure. For some medicines public funds pay hundreds of euros a box, not just for production cost but including profit and patent rights. Someone should explain to us why we should be bled white to enrich the shareholders of pharmaceutical multinationals.

Overall it is reasonable to estimate that 10% of public spending on materials goes to profits, an absurd donation that we make to affluent levels of society not only nationally but worldwide. Yet another good reason to uncouple the public economy from the market and so ensure the former a productive apparatus supplying it if not totally, with at least the principal means to help it fulfil its functions. It would make no sense for the state to manage chocolate factories; but equally it makes no sense that it does not possess land, cowsheds, factories, pharmaceutical works, paper mills, flour mills, dairies, nor manufacture furniture, engines,

computers, paper or bed linen, for its own use. This traditional way of operating is today obstructed in all possible ways because the market is not prepared to let go of an affair worth 127 billion euros, about one quarter of the money received in tax, which is what the Italian state spent on materials in 2007. An affair with corruption wheeling around it like birds of prey.

From Rome to Washington passing through Brussels, institutions and governments claim to be guardians of the public interest. Facts tell us they are more like prison guards, pistols at the ready to fire on the state if it dares to make decisions the market does not like. Of the twenty-seven members of the European Commission, four deal with commerce, marketing, competition and enterprise, and not one with the public interest. Common sense tells us that we would all gain from a return by the state to the production of its own implements and consumable goods. It would spend less and even gain from selling to commerce if it went back to being the sole manager of water, gas, and electricity supplies, It would have three key products to sell to private companies at a fair price. Finally it would be possible to bring into play substantial tax relief for the have-nots; invoked by everyone, but really wanted by not many at all.

Progress from a public economy based on a tax system to a public economy running on people's work leaves open many questions which would require experiment. Like the question of levels of organization: which functions should be on a national and which on a local level? Should we prefer big and centralized or small and scattered productive plants? Which government bodies should run these local and national services? The answers will depend on technological considerations, on energy efficiency, on environmental impact, but they also have human, social and political implications. For example forms of organization that favour participation and personal responsibility will be preferred because without these, our transformation cannot happen. An aim arrived at by re-establishing a sense of community, perceiving the public dimension not as a far-off and oppressive presence, but as the community of which we are part. Thus the importance of the local dimension because only on a small scale can the community sense revive, starting from the block you live in, your neighbourhood, reclaiming the streets, gardens, nursery schools and medical centres. The time has come to replace money with social cohesion, as our axis.

## **12. The regulated market house**

Markets as centres of exchange are a time-honoured tradition. The capitalist market however as a means of enrichment through sales of goods and services produced by salaried work is

fairly recent. Socialists do not recognize market capitalism's right to exist, but modern public opinion thinks differently. All agree in any case that the market should have rules and limits attached to its functioning. From the point of view of our *well-living*, the market would deal with desires, the optional needs which do not have to do with personal dignity. From this, four principles arise. Firstly, in the case of scarce resources, the market must have a subordinate role to the public economy because desires matter less than rights. Secondly, private interest should never clash with the general interest and the market must go with the rules and directions determined by public authority protecting the general interest. Thirdly, private business must be conducted in respect of the rights of workers, consumers, depositors of savings and suppliers. Fourthly, production and commerce must be organized in such a way as to reduce energy consumption, use of materials and production of waste to a minimum. This last point needs some amplifying. For example this principle would require preferential treatment for local over global, perhaps introducing the circulation of a local currency parallel to the national, a tax on miles/kilometres for goods transport and the adoption of local brands of goods. It would require discouragement of the use of scarce resources (fish, wood, minerals, petrol) through the introduction of specific taxes, and encouragement to use renewable energies with appropriate incentives. And it would require a limit to production of promotional wrappings through a tax on packaging and also on advertisement.

The present crisis tells us that financial activities should also be given an overhaul. Banks, stock market and insurance must return to their traditional roles: no more betting, gambling or stashing up profits for the swindler of the moment. Banks have to go back to being structures that receive savings in order to finance productive social investment. Stock exchanges to being the source of capital for business. Insurance companies to cover risks for a premium. All under tight public control and in full transparency. Clarity of operation and clarity in the obligations assumed with debit, credit and risk. It is a real crime that financial structures are permitted to gamble with other people's money, with gains going into the managers' pockets and losses

### **13. Jobs galore**

*Well-living* demands a correct mixture of all these three houses: the do it yourself, the public and the market economy, every individual fitting simultaneously into all three, because they would represent different functions. So we would have not just one occupation but three, not one full-time job but various part-times, not flexibility at the service of the firm, but at the service of ourselves, the workers: so we can choose how many hours to do in the factory or the office on the basis of our limits of income, our family needs and lifestyles. One wouldn't

be asking “What's your job?” but “Which are your jobs?” At the base of the three models of engagement would be the do-it-yourself for personal and domestic needs which could be seen as a background canvas. Across it brushstrokes of different colours would represent time-bands of work spent with the public economy, for our fundamental needs, and the market economy for the optionals. Each individual canvas would be a composition on its own: infinite personal variables rendering each picture different from others. The timing of DIY and salaried work would be changed from one person to another on the basis of their habits or needs, whereas the time dedicated to the public economy would be the same for all, the time specified by community decision. The one certainty would be the protagonists of each: people and families at the centre of the DIY, the community of the public economy and business of the market economy.

## **Part three : HOW TO GET THERE**

### **14. Demonstrating**

To change the system is a lengthy process which implies a principal theme to promote and public debate to put out the new ideas and set them into action little by little. To reach these objectives there are five strategies summed up in the following key words: demonstrating, trying out, resisting, pushing and consolidating.

Demonstrating means pointing out the way to go. It is the projection outlining the shape of the new society, or new economy: not only its aims and principles but also the limits to respect and the organization to be worked out. A job which has to be done collectively because no one person has the recipe in his pocket, and because this is no longer a time for imposing but for participating. We have to build our future all together through discussion, reflection and experiment.

Therefore we must make an effort to publicize our proposal, to have it debated in every possible sphere, enrich it with suggestions that discussion brings, let it penetrate into popular culture and become a political proposal.

We should then at last have a return to true politics centred on problems and solutions rather than on power keeping devices.

We are no longer used to planning in a big way but have resigned ourselves to dealing with detail, struggling for small changes which are more likely to happen. But without an overall plan you don't construct but patch up at the most, always rushing to fill in the cracks the system has caused. Patching up is a duty but vision is a necessity because without it we are lost.

### **15. Trying out**

Trying out means proving through experience that change is possible. When we activate our sober life-style, when we promote a local buying group<sup>20</sup> or a car-sharing group, when we open a fair-trade shop or a branch of an ethical bank, when we found a co-housing group, in short any time we succeed in carrying out, on a personal or group level, practices that go with our well-living economy, we are not only making a coherent statement but we are achieving a political aim.

Don Lorenzo Milani<sup>21</sup> taught us that the powerful do not hold up on their own but take

<sup>20</sup> In many Italian towns hundreds of families are getting together to constitute buying groups.

<sup>21</sup> A Tuscan priest (d. 1967) who denounced Church inconsistency and made history by supporting civil disobedience against unfair laws.

strength from the people they rule. The present unjust, rapacious destructive system stays in place because we sustain it through our daily actions: work, consumption, savings, tax-paying. It is we by means of the goods we buy who permit business to live and flourish, the same companies who exploit, pollute and steal. It is we who through our savings permit the banks to grow, the banks that finance the arms trade, cheat people with set-up stocks and let bandit executives stash their loot in tax havens. It is we who with our over-consumption are running down the Earth's resources, removing assets from the poor, submerging the planet with our rubbish. It is important, therefore, to consume critically, save responsibly and live soberly.

Society is what emerges from rules and attitudes. If we all behaved in an aware, responsible, just and sober way, we would not only show another face to the world, but oblige even the system to change its rules; no power can survive if faced with a thinking mass of people who put coherence above cowardice, commitment above a quiet life, fair play above petty avidity. Coherence also has an educational role: it stimulates reflection, it testifies that an alternative is to hand, it inspires courage and hope. A role that is amplified if institutions themselves take the initiative, especially those in direct contact with citizens. When a local council distributes water in cans to encourage the use of tap-water it is giving out a message about sustainable consumption to thousands of families. When it builds a renewable energy plant it is demonstrating to a multitude of people that there is another way to produce electrical energy. When it organizes our waste separation, it is forcing the entire local population to modify its way of life.

Precisely because local authorities can carry out this vital persuasive function it makes sense for us to endeavour to occupy responsible positions in their administration.

There are well-known examples of mayors of proven moral and political quality who have remodelled urban structures, social services, environmental services and political life itself, according to criteria of participation, sobriety, solidarity and social inclusion.

Of course as we know life is often slippery in political parties and animated less by coherence than power logic: newcomers risk getting sucked into a whirlpool of deceit and ambush. For this reason our would-be councillor shouldn't enter the Town Hall alone but with the back-up of a strong support group which would help him or her to stick to principles, and intervene when necessary to do battle with entrenched powers.

## **16. Resisting**

Resisting means blocking the advance of destructive measures. Examples are: the fight against water-privatization, opposition to the third runway at Heathrow, the protest against a factory-

farm in East Anglia, the action to halt the new coal-fired plant in Kent.

N.I.M.B.Y. (Not in my back yard) defines the struggle by local populations to defend their territory. Some are critical about this, finding it too narrow and partial, They would prefer a national movement with stronger political awareness, fighting to change the whole system.

They are right – you don't act only when the bomb falls on your own roof, you have to work with others to make sure the bombs are put out of action. But if on the one hand we have to work towards a more mature movement, on the other we need to encourage the Nimby attitude because it has a strong deterring power. If in every city a boycott flared up against private water management or in every territory where the burial of radioactive waste was planned, barricades were raised; if every field sown with GM maize was set alight, if no council was prepared to accept a nuclear power station in the area, if the people rose up wherever there was a new plan for an out-of-town shopping centre – then the authorities would be completely foiled: they would not know where to locate their destructive projects, and would be forced to abandon them. It is for this reason that the territory should be vetted inch by inch by local groups defending it from whoever wants to contaminate it, disfigure it, remove its common value. These should be groups, however, that don't close themselves off in isolation but support and discuss with each other, even oppose each other, so as to define common horizons and prepare for bigger national struggles.

## **17. Pushing**

This means pressure on the system to take steps in the new direction. We know that change can only happen gradually and only with some alteration in the mentality and behaviour of citizens, institutions and companies. We also know, that, as vessels communicate, so consumers' choices influence corporate policy and corporate choices condition the habits of consumers.

In the same way popular pressure influences the choices of institutions while new laws will alter mass behaviour. We are all part of an active/passive game: it's not about one side making the action and the other adapting to it. We can all play our part according to our possibilities.

As citizens, as well as ourselves adopting responsible and sustainable lifestyles, we must exert all possible pressure on business and institutions to induce them to change their behaviour. In recent years there has been a lot of writing and experiment about corporations, and ways to put pressure on them are now well-known: critical consumerism, opinion campaigns, boycotting. The experience of dealing with institutions is more established so should be an easier matter, but the variables in the game keep changing so each time one has to start again

from scratch. There is a big distinction between levels of institutions: it is one thing to set up relations with local bodies and quite another with parliament or government nationally. On the local level people are more likely to know about problems and more accessible and amenable to rally for a cause. Relation with authorities are more direct. It makes sense in such dimension to gain a seat in the council, be an official or stand for mayor. So many councils in Italy even neighbouring ones with the same party in power, have very different politics because of differing personal sensibilities among administrators. There are 'virtuous councils' from whose experience we can learn.

Small is decidedly beautiful, but certain decisions have to be taken at national level, and it is inevitable that we clash with the main institutions. With regard to this as well there is a problem of means and ends. On the means or 'strategy' level until we have gained strength it is useless for instance to form a party for electoral purposes. This does not mean we should not stand for parliament. We need to wait until the right moment, when we are better established among our supporters: a premature step could cause us to lose our identity. This happens to many people, a perverse effect of democracy. In a wealthy society the defence of what we have is often seen as of prime importance, and thus the poor or dispossessed can become the enemy. Violent feelings will be expressed against them instead of sympathy and parties will align themselves with these in order to get votes, regardless of their original principles. The result is a shift to the right of all parties and the phenomenon will persist until a counter force arises to invert the political priorities. Not just sitting around in assemblies saying yes to comply with the majority, but with the will to denounce, bring out problems, find lasting solutions, circulate new ideas about the economy and social life according to universal principles. What is needed is the courage to question mainstream thinking and create a new public opinion less tamed by the requirements of power, even if it means being sent off to the catacombs.

Until the time is ripe for this kind of challenge within the institutions the only way forward is pressure from without by demand and protest to obtain an inversion of tendency by those in power. The strategies, the means by which to do this, are campaigns, public petitions, demonstrations. But the core of the matter remains the content, the ends. So many things need changing that it is difficult to prioritize them.

On the whole one can determine two main spheres of activity: the defence of rights, and the transformation of the productive system into one from a sustainable perspective. Both of these are of great strategic importance in this time of crisis. Today when thousands of people are being dismissed from work and the income of many families not even covering their basic

needs you can say there are two last hopes for them: collective solidarity in the form of free social rights and security, and job creation in sustainability-oriented sectors. We have to accept that some sectors are at the end of the line because they developed in times that are ceasing to exist. For example the motor-car industry has no future and it is absurd to go on throwing public money in that direction. The way to go is to reconvert the sector to the production of buses, trains and minibuses supplied by hydrogen: but this fuel cannot be obtained from renewable sources in sufficient quantity to maintain a billion cars. Similarly renewables must be developed for electrical energy, and production from fossil fuels abandoned. Nuclear power is now merely an electoral issue, not only because the problem of radioactive waste is in no way resolved, but because there is hardly any uranium: at the present rate of consumption there is enough for another thirty, maximum fifty years.

In conclusion: all useless or harmful sectors have to be singled out and their reconversion financed into production both necessary and sustainable. At the same time the sectors to be developed should be strengthened; not only alternative energy but, for example, water management. The Italian water system is made up of 291,000 kilometres of old and worn-out piping which leaks on average 42% of its contents. The renewal of the aqueducts is an absolute priority. So is the expansion of waste-recycling, of the local railway network, the safeguarding of territory, the repair of school and hospital buildings and rebuilding of many other infrastructures and public service buildings.

And let us by no means forget the debt we owe to the South of the world after five centuries of plundering. Above all to the poorest countries which are in need of everything: hospitals, schools, transport, electricity. To produce what they need is an intelligent way of contributing to their human and social development while at the same time sustaining production in our own countries.

As a backdrop to all this reconstruction we propose the reduction of work-time. Industrial development has brought with it a vast expansion of technology with considerably increased returns on work. The demand could have been to change this productive increase into a reduction of working hours. If it had, the consumer society would not have taken off and today perhaps we would be working three or four hours a day. But instead we carried on the consumerist model preferring to transform the gains into pay-rises which go then into useless shopping and hence more jobs. But today there is no more room for growth: the only way to create full employment is to divide up work and reduce hours with salaries and profits in more equal proportion. These measures all show that our well-living economy is the best solution also as a way of emerging from the crisis. If we could then make a more fundamental reform

and put the economy on the right track for the construction of our three autonomous and independent houses, we could be pretty sure we never again need to bang our heads against the wall of recession.

### **18. Weaving (Consolidating)**

Weaving means tightening our connections so we can become a political entity capable of piloting the change. In Italy there is an extremely rich panorama of associations and social movements, but they don't manage to express their full potential as they are too separate and self-absorbed. Within this many-coloured world everyone follows their own project: fair-trade, water rights, slow food, ethical finance, immigrants' rights. Good important projects but still just small beer. We fight the disasters which land on our territories: high-velocity trains, nuclear power stations, land fills, incinerators, military bases; but if or when we manage to veer them off we go back to the daily grind. We are united in spirit, but as regards action we follow our own road. What is missing is moments to meet, a mutual debate; a fairtrade campaigner will not reckon she has much in common with a public water activist, a peace campaigner won't think to share a lot with a 'sober' lifestyle (even if more and more wars are about resources). We are all intent on sharpening our own pencils but never think to use them on the same canvas to sketch a common design which might represent us all. Like nerve cells superspecialized in their own function but incapable of contact with the next one, we can't make a system or a movement, and are becoming groups that are professionally impeccable but at the same time politically meaningless. Midges, in fact, that depending on the convenience of the prevailing power can either end up squashed under its heel or sucked up into its great belly.

Padre Zanotelli<sup>22</sup> has been saying for years that if we want to make an impact we have to adopt the strategy of Lilliput. In Jonathan Swift's satiric fable 'Gulliver's Travels' the minuscule Lilliputians succeed in capturing Gulliver, many times bigger than they, by acting in unison. Each Lilliputian concentrates on a single hair of the giant, a minimum gesture but completely efficient because it is synchronized. Not straggling but moving as one they immobilize Gulliver while he is sleeping. We learn from this that fragmentation can be transformed into strength but only if we co-ordinate, sliding like pearls on to the same necklace. That is why it's important to come out of ourselves, weave links with other groups in the locality, organize connecting structures on a national or even international level. We must

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<sup>22</sup> Alex Zanotelli, also a priest, inspires many Italians with his work for the poor and his unwavering belief in an alternative society.

do this knitting job not only for mutual information about what we are doing, to organize meetings and campaigns, share resources and services, but also to put our political views under discussion and not just perfunctorily but as a necessity. Everything is interconnected and any topic affects the entire system. When war was started in Iraq it was immediately obvious that the real motive was the pursuit of oil: to oppose the war was to call into question our whole consumerist system, from which the logical step was converting to a sober lifestyle. But the theme was dropped: we didn't have the courage to carry it through publicly, perhaps for fear of unpopularity, perhaps because we were not prepared to face all the questions that such a revolution might raise. We didn't take our responsibilities seriously enough and will certainly pay for it. In the future there will be new colonial wars and they may well be acclaimed as a good thing. The fault will be partly ours because we haven't spelt out to the world those links between war and lifestyle. And in particular we haven't demonstrated that change is *possible*. People are not stupid and can grasp straight off what effects different decisions might have: they want answers and if they don't get them, they lose interest. If we leave questions half answered we lose our meaning, a risk we already run in areas pertaining to water, waste collection, energy, climate change. We cannot go on *ad infinitum* with little protests and stop-gap demos: we all know now that the heart of the problem is the unbalance between human greed and the planet's carrying capacity, and that in the end the reduction problem will have to be faced. We can't escape the certainty that we will have to rewrite the rules of the economy. If we lack the capacity to put the present structure of the economy into question, together with blueprints of alternatives uniting sobriety with well-living, we will find our ideas left out, dropped by both radicals and moderates. Accused by the former of inability to pursue our arguments to their logical conclusions, and by the latter of making proposals that are unreconcilable with the system.

We have no choice: either we take on board this great alternative or we wither away. The way forward is meeting, asking each other what we have in common, what world we want to construct, what form it would take. Slowly a common political horizon can be outlined: a single framework of reference. Not a project trying to work out unforeseeable detail, not yet just a mere setting out of principle. We have to go beyond simple slogans and give shape to ideas such as degrowth, equity, real sustainability. We have to begin to outline a sketch plan of how the organization might be. Then from grand ideas we should come back to reality and actually start transforming our projected Utopia into the real thing, defining the initiatives to take on, the directions to follow, the timing to observe.

If we could succeed in constructing a great movement within which each group maintains its

own identity and specific area of action, but at the same time have a commitment together with the others to carry forward a common political project we would have in our hands a grand force for change. We would at least be able to join the detail to the whole picture, the present to the future, the local to the global. We could make up a political agenda. We could oblige professors, parties, unions and institutions to discuss with each other these timeless themes in the light of the new logic. We could demonstrate the possibilities of different systems and organizations from the ones we have now. We could rekindle hope, the most powerful element in the fight against conformity. When you live in a concentration camp with all possibility of flight blocked, you only manage to survive by adapting to the rules of the system: negotiating in competition with your fellow-prisoners, trying to ingratiate those in power, making a bid for freedom at others' expense. Everyday scenes of course in today's market society where they try and make us believe there are no other ways to live besides this one. Only the hope of being able to construct something different can give us the courage to defy the powers that be, disobey rules, make alternative choices and ally ourselves with people in the same situation, so that all together we can find the solution to our common problems.

## **19. Appeal**

We have to organize to become a strong visible, incisive movement. The first step is to meet in order to confirm our values, work out together what alternatives there are, exchange experiences of resistance and participation, discuss initiatives and the necessary routes towards the change-process. And so we are asking everyone who would like to be a part of this journey to send us a message of support. It will be a way to set off a first contact between people and groups so that even if their work is specific in particular areas and they have their own way of doing it, they are all united by the same values and the same will to build an equitable, caring and sustainable society. A participative process from below, a grass-roots process. The only road that can lead to change.

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